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Looking at the family photo album: a resumed theoretical discussion of why and how

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Abstract

Having been the most widespread practice of photography since the late 19th century, it is only in the recent few decades that family photography has come into focus of academic attention. Scholars working with family albums have mainly come from anthropology, whereas scholars from the aesthetical fields, art history, photography studies, and cultural studies have been more hesitant about how to approach such a material. Using three family photo albums from the late 1960s and onwards as examples, the goal of this paper is to underline that family photos contain emotional, psychological, and affective qualities that reach further than the individual owner and that should be put forward, also within the fields of aesthetics and humanities. Family photo albums are about social and emotional communication, they can be interpreted as ways of understanding and coming to terms with life, and at the same time they document more sociological aspects of daily lives, that we do not have access to from other historical sources. The paper suggests a theoretical framing as a combination of now “classical” photography theory and more recent cultural theory in order to highlight the possible interpretative findings in an analysis of family photography drawing on cultural theory, social-cultural anthropology, material culture studies, affect theory, and phenomenology.



Mette Sandbye currently researches the relationship between amateur photography and collective history since the 1960s. She was the editor of the first Danish history of photography (*Dansk Fotografihistorie*, Gyldendal 2004), and she has published numerous books and articles on contemporary art photography and photography as part of the visual culture, most lately *Digital Snaps. The New Face of Photography* (ed. with Jonas Larsen, I.B.Tauris 2014).

Keywords: *family photo album; histories of photography; vernacular photography; cultural theory; material studies; affect*

In the spring term 2014, I taught an MA level class called “Photography—art, medium, image” at the University of Copenhagen addressing MA students of art history, cultural studies, and visual culture. It was a survey course and when I talked about my own research on the family photo album and tried to inspire the students to study this kind

of material, a few of them were strongly provoked by the fact that such material should be included on their curriculum. The rest showed great interest combined with frustration about what could be called lack of tools and theoretical framings. This article is written for them—and for colleagues from my own academic field, which is a

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combination of art history and aesthetical studies, cultural studies, and photography studies.

Family photography is one of the most common types of photography in terms of its sheer numbers. Yet even if most people in the Western world have created an album in one sense or another, at least since the early 1900s until the early 2000s when digital archiving took over, only recently has the family album entered survey histories of photography. Beaumont Newhall's influential *The History of Photography*, which has been through several editions since the 1930s and has served as a standard reader for generations of photography historians, does not mention the family album, for example.

In 2002, Mary Warner Marien's *Photography: A Cultural History* declared war on Newhall's writing of photographic history in fine-artistic terms. She wanted to investigate the medium of photography across all genres and explore the boundaries between amateurs and professionals. The 530-page long, richly illustrated book, towards the end, contains a small section headed "Family Pictures." Here the genre is described almost exclusively with the following sentences: "The content of family photographs was dominated by celebratory occasions, such as weddings, birthdays, and vacations. Few families resolutely set out to record the look of everyday life, such as messy kitchens and unmade beds. Fewer still made visual records of emotionally trying times, or used the camera for psychological self-study or therapy."¹

We all know stories about people who saved the family photo album as the most cherished object when they fled from their burning house. Most people agree that family photos represent "something emotional" for the individual owner, no matter what the images actually show: staged ritual events or snapshots of the everyday.

Apart from inspiring my students and colleagues from my own field, a central goal of this article is to challenge Marien's rather definitive statement by enhancing that family photos contain emotional, psychological, and affective qualities that reach further than the individual owner and that should be put forward, in histories of photography as well as in more thorough and specialized academic analysis. Marien's survey history, like most other national and international histories of photography, does not find family albums interesting enough to deal with extensively,

or she (like so many other scholars) may simply not know what to make of these "large image collections," as she calls them.² *Photography: A Cultural History* thus continues to discuss artists whose work is *inspired by* family photographs; these examples dominate the remainder of the book's 15-page section on this vernacular genre.

WHAT PHOTOGRAPHS DO: AN INTERPRETIVE PROBLEM

Until recently the history and theory of photography have been especially concerned with what a photograph *is*, rather than with looking at what a photograph *does*.³ Family photography has most often been regarded as a ritualized and deeply ideological bourgeois self-representation. Geoffrey Batchen is one of the newer pioneers in photography research to take an interest in family photography. In an essay from 2008, he observed that "they don't easily fit into a historical narrative still anxiously, insecurely, focused on originality, innovation, and individualism."⁴ In other words, historically speaking there has been a mismatch between photography's propagation in "everyday" culture and the critical attention it has been paid in photography scholarship. Batchen continues:

... the snapshot, precisely because this is the most numerous and popular of photographic forms, represents an interpretive problem absolutely central to any ambitious scholarship devoted to the history of photography. Oblivious to the artistic prejudices that still guide much of that scholarship, family photographs challenge us to find another way of talking about photography, a way that can somehow account for the determined banality of these, and indeed most other, photographic pictures.⁵

I agree with Batchen that family photography represents "an interpretive problem" to photography scholars, most often trained in the aesthetic sciences. The aim of this article is thus to suggest a theoretical "framing" of the family photo album as a combination of now "classical" photography theory and more recent cultural theory in order to highlight the possible interpretative findings in an analysis of family photography. Indeed there has been more recent interest in vernacular and family photography by researchers such as Batchen, Elizabeth Edwards, Christopher Pinney, Gillian Rose, Anna Dahlgren, Sigrid Lien, Martha

Langford, Patrizia DiBello and others, and I am inspired by their work and indebted to them.⁶

Many questions arise when looking at family photo albums, whether found in private homes, in flea markets or in public archives. For the last couple of years, I have collected such albums from different geographical places such as the U.S., Denmark, and Japan, with a focus on family photo albums from the 1960s onwards. Looking at such material through academic glasses, many questions arise: Should we focus on the private narrative or should we regard the album as an object of sociological insight? Can we speak of a specific aesthetics? How do we combine these angles? Do albums from very different national contexts enable us to talk about a global “Kodak culture”? Or does the Japanese family photo album differ radically from the Danish, the Danish from the American?

Working with this kind of material made me realize that these albums can be used as tools with which to “do theory.” In this article, I will use three examples of family photo albums to “do theory” and thereby inspire art historians, photography and visual studies scholars to think of other, complementary approaches to the very widespread study of what a photograph *is* (indexical, related to time, death, nostalgia, frozen past, etc.) and to reflect on how they approach such material. I argue that family photo albums, like other forms of vernacular photography, are objects at the same time related to personal, affective, social, and cultural communication and that all these aspects must be included in the analysis. The family photo album is a globally circulating form that not only takes locally specific forms but also “produces localities” that creates and negotiate individual stories.⁷

A pioneer in the study of family photos, or “home mode photography,” as he called it,⁸ is American anthropologist Richard Chalfen. In this context it is worth calling attention to his seminal 1987 book *Snapshot Versions of Life*, which—apart from Pierre Bourdieu’s work—is one of the first comprehensive discussions of the potential of studying family photography.⁹ Talking from a research platform of ethnographic fieldwork on American middle-class family photography from the period 1940 to 1980, Chalfen argues that family photography must be seen as at the same time a process and a “doing,” an act of communication and a “symbolic activity.” This important book serves as

a very general introduction to the field, seen from the viewpoint of ethnography and cultural studies. Pointing, like Bourdieu also did, to the “redundancy” of the material, seeing it as “a reaffirmation of cultural and structural values” (p. 98), Chalfen at the same time introduces a whole range of important aspects or “modes” from tourist photography to home movies. He calls his own book a “useful starting point” (p. 162) on what he names “Kodak culture” and concludes that “comparative work is much needed” (p. 162), for instance focusing on questions such as “Do members of other Western cultures or Eastern cultures participate in Kodak culture in similar and familiar ways?” (p. 163). Chalfen’s initial fieldwork from the 1980s deserves a much wider follow-up, both within his own field of anthropology and indeed coming from other areas of the humanities like my own. With reservation to the short form of the article, this is what I intend to introduce here.

A FLOOD OF CIRCULATING IMAGES

Family and other popular forms of photography still tend to disappear as authors—like before-mentioned Marien—of the now classical photography histories in the 20th century turn to discussions of fine art and documentary photographs. The best known survey histories of photography, from Beaumont Newhall’s to Michel Frizot’s, include very little on family photography; although scholars have written about individual case studies, there is no general or comprehensive history of the family photo album.¹⁰

Apart from Richard Chalfen and before him Pierre Bourdieu and his sociology team,¹¹ whom I will return to shortly, the French photo historian Bertrand Mary is among the few early researchers who have been interested in the role photography plays in everyday life, and what we do with our photographs on a daily basis. In *La photo sur la cheminée: Naissance d’un culte moderne* (1983) he analyzes popular photography’s two major “leaps,” namely the first in the wake of Kodak’s launch of the Brownie box camera and the roll film in 1888 with the advertising slogan “You press the button, we do the rest,” which made it easy and affordable for ordinary people to photograph, and the second leap around World War I, when all the soldiers and their family members wanted to be photographed before the soldier went to war. The third

leap, as I see it, must be the late 1960s, where color film, the film cassette, the flash cube, and cheap camera types were introduced, first in the United States and shortly after also in Europe. Bertrand Mary states that out of 15 billion private photos produced worldwide in 1970, the U.S. alone produced 6 billion. A fourth leap is of course today, where amateur snapshots flourish in billions on a daily basis on the Internet.¹² My examples in this article stem from the third leap onwards. Since Chalfen, not much had been written about this important period in the history of the family snapshot. I guess one reason is that this kind of newer material has not yet really been included in public archives, but is still to be found in private homes.

I suggest that one reason why academic scholars have taken a renewed interest in amateur and vernacular photography is the explosion of smart-phone photography and the spread on the Internet. The feeling of standing in the middle of something new and waving goodbye to an old, analog technology is probably also an explanation for the exploding interest of analog snapshot photography among collectors and museums. Today there are numerous websites for collectors of “vernacular photography,” and in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of leading art museums mounted exhibitions with this type of visual material. A recent example is Tate Modern’s “How We Are Now” from 2007; another would be the website of the Photographers’ Gallery in London, to which users can contribute their own snapshots. Photographers’ Gallery’s 2012 exhibition of Fiona Tan’s “Vox Populi, London” included more than 250 family photographs from over 90 participants invited by Tan. Not only Fiona Tan, but many other contemporary visual artists have included and played with the genre of family photography in their artworks.¹³

Large international publishing houses have recently published books with such snapshots, often dating to the first half of the 20th century.¹⁴ Common to these books, catalogs, and exhibitions, however, is a lack of analysis of the material reproduced. A typical example is *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection*, which was the title of both a book and an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2000 that featured amateur photos from the 1910s to the 1960s.¹⁵ Photographs in

the show were obviously collected and exhibited because they were apparently innocent or honest and, moreover, contained surreal or poetic qualities that were either latent or unconscious. Collector Thomas Walther wrote in the book’s afterword that the photographs on view “document a profound innocence, tremendous pride and a unique sense of humor in American society. There is no faking, no strain, no theory here, only the simplicity and directness of capturing moments of life [...]. These photographs remind us that the camera can be an extension of genius in the hands of any one of us.”¹⁶

PHOTOGRAPHY THEORY’S “TAKE”

Apart from the few anthropological studies by people such as Chalfen and Musello, what tools, then, do theories of photography and critical scholarship give us to write about the “ordinary” family albums? An early influential study on family photography was French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s above-mentioned *Un art moyen* from 1965. Through empirical studies in a local context, Bourdieu and his research assistants demonstrated how deeply conventional and ritualized family photography can be. In Denmark, art historian André Wang Hansen has written about family photography from a sociological perspective like Bourdieu’s. His 1982 interpretation of the family album depended on a political premise typical for that period in European scholarship: namely, that the album is “an organized ideological preparation of a postulated ideal state.”¹⁷

In contrast, one could address another French photo theory milestone, Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* (published posthumously as *La chambre claire* in 1980), which takes a phenomenological approach to photography, identifying the deeply personal affection and even grief that family photos can offer viewers. Although both are informed by the tradition of French structuralism, the two books by Bourdieu and Barthes offer very different perspectives: the former focuses on the social redundancy of the material; the latter focuses on the personal affect of the user and develops a general, phenomenological theory of the ontology of photography rather than a set of analytical takes and tools. In the following I will introduce a handful of supplementary approaches.

THREE DIFFERENT ALBUMS

But first an introduction to some material to think with. My first example is a Danish album from 1971 (ill. 1–4). It is a family photo album, but a special—although quite typical—one, since it documents a family holiday to Spain, Costa del Sol, in August 1971. The family consists of a grown-up son, the producer of the album, and his parents. The album pages are made of gray cardboard, and the album starts with an aerial photograph of Denmark, taken from the charter flight, leaving Copenhagen and heading for the south. Then follow photographs from the hotel “Stella Polaris,” swimming pool, restaurant, a trip to Granada, etc. The album was donated to the photography collection of the Royal Library in Copenhagen after the deaths of the parents, so as a researcher I have no direct access to the producers/owners of it and I am thus not able to do an ethnographical fieldwork study of it. Instead I focus on how the album bears historical witness about the early wave of so-called “charter tourism” that began in Denmark in the 1960s, transporting thousands of lower and middle-class Danes to new and exotic places such as Spain for typically a week’s vacation, so that they could experience palm trees and paella for the first time in their lives. A question to ask this material could be this: What can it tell us about the phenomenon of early charter tourism that we cannot read in other kinds of sources?¹⁸

My second example is Oliver’s personal photo album (ill. 5–7). It was made by his mother as a chronological presentation of his life from birth to the age of 18, when he left his family in Florida to

study at an art school in Chicago. Oliver was born in 1968, so he belongs to a generation whose lives were documented in Kodak snapshots as never before. When he was about to leave home in 1986 the album was donated to him by his mother—as she had done with his two elder brothers when they left home—as a gesture of affection and even grief. This album can tell us about affective bonds in families in general as well as about a specific period in American post-war welfare society.

The third example that I dig out, a little accidental from my vast collection of albums, is a page from Japanese Yuko’s album, taken around 2005 (ill. 8–10). The album documents the everyday as well as festive life of the family, and it is produced as a scrapbook, including letters, paper clippings, and other decorative objects such as the little origami paper bird on one page (ill. 8). This page shows Yuko, her husband and two children at a family event, all posing and nicely dressed: a very typical family photo album motif. A more thorough study of this kind of non-Western material could widen the scope of Chalfen’s 1987 work.

I would claim that these albums are about social and emotional communication, they can be interpreted as ways of understanding and coming to terms with life, and at the same time they document more sociological aspects of daily lives that we do not have access to from other historical sources. To grasp as many aspects as possible—the materiality, the narrativity, the performativity, the global differences and similarities, to name just a few—we need additional tools to the ones provided by Bourdieu and Barthes. We can stand on Chalfen’s shoulders but in the following I suggest complementing the ethnographic toolbox.

CULTURAL THEORY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The development of the fields of cultural and visual studies in especially the 1980s and 1990s also meant an increased interest in studying vernacular and other non-art photography forms. Writing in the 21st century, 27 years after Chalfen’s seminal study, I want to bring forth additional “turns” or theoretical framings to help us analyze family albums as the above-mentioned—from social-cultural anthropology, material studies and the extremely wide area we could call affect studies or



Illustration 1.



Illustration 2.



Illustration 3.



Illustration 4.



Illustration 5.



Illustration 6.

studies of emotions, as a recent turn within history studies is called.

In her book on family photography, *Suspended Conversations* (2001), based on Walter Ong's theories of the importance of sound and voice in cultural analysis, Martha Langford—like Chalfen—talks about photography as an act of communication. Elizabeth Edwards, moreover, has stressed the importance of touch, and she considers family photography an important part of oral culture.¹⁹ Edwards calls family photography an interactive medium, because it creates history and makes feelings emerge that otherwise would not have been articulated, if the images had not existed. Anthropological studies such as Edwards' work—

and Sarah Pink's "visual anthropology" must also be mentioned here²⁰—can contribute to regarding the photo album as relational, communicative, active, and non-static. Rather than attempting to determine the original meaning in the mostly silent material, we must instead try to identify the creator's "performance." But while the material many scholars write about is either early family and portrait photography (Batchen, Langford) or various forms of ethnographic photography (Edwards, often from Australia), in my search for a continuation of Chalfen's work I call for texts on contemporary and ordinary family albums as my examples, and for texts that situate them between a global and a local context.

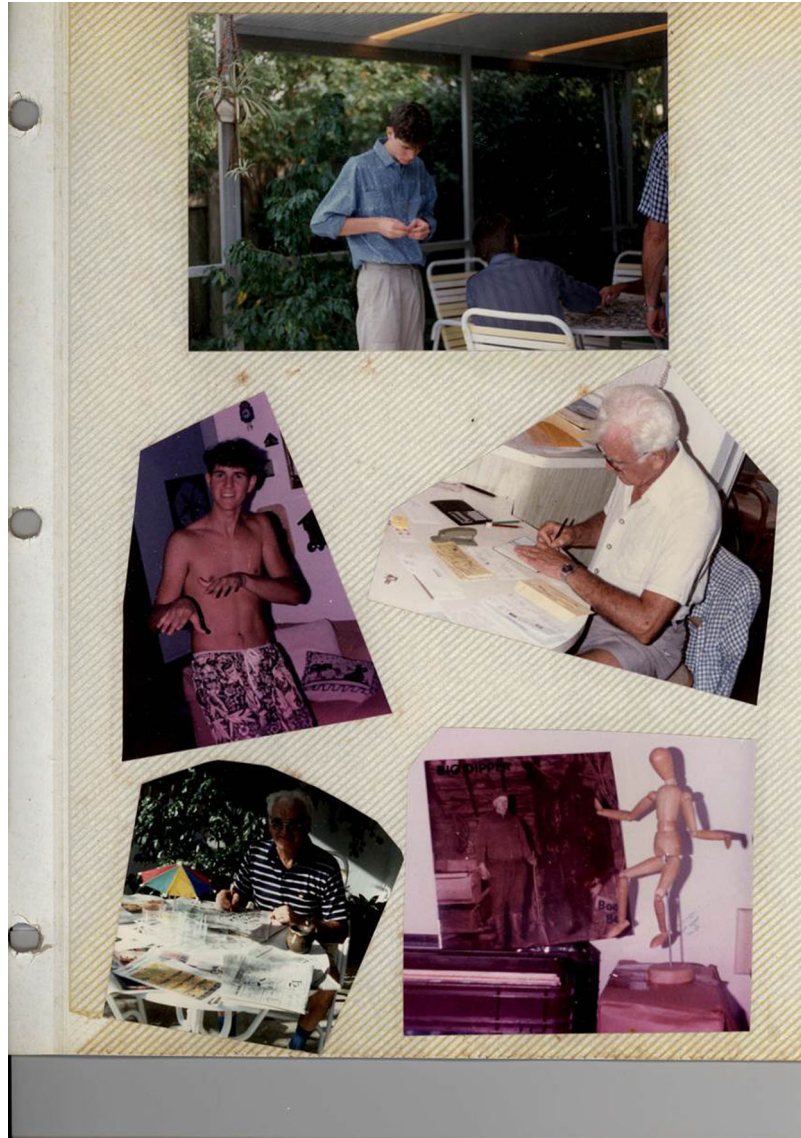


Illustration 7.

In her studies, for example, of the use of family photos by indigenous Australians, Edwards calls them “active sources” and “performative objects”²¹ in relation to the understanding of self, roots, and culture. She stresses the importance of considering them as material objects and thus considering concepts such as intention, production, distribution, and perhaps even destruction or subjugation of these private photos,²² and the material’s emotional effect must be incorporated in the analysis. Edwards calls photographs “a form of interlocutors,” because they literally unlock memories and allow knowledge to be transferred or passed down to the present.²³ In Barthes’s essay “The Rhetoric of the Image” originally pub-

lished in 1964, he described photography as an “anthropological revolution in human history,”²⁴ but it is only recently that the field of humanity studies has experienced an “anthropological turn,” to use American art historian Hal Foster’s term for a central current in the visual arts in the 1990s.²⁵ The few studies by anthropologists like Chalfen have only recently inspired the aesthetically founded tradition of doing “history of photography.”

Approaching, for instance, a Japanese photo album, the Western scholar may want to ask: Is there something specifically Japanese in these albums? But this question might not be the most productive one with which to begin, as it assumes



Illustration 8.



Illustration 9.



Illustration 10.

a fundamental difference between the albums reproduced “elsewhere” and others produced at “home,” and further suggests that such difference can be pinpointed. Instead the album could be seen as a local “archive” negotiating between globally circulating forms, such as “Kodak culture,” scrapbook making, and the social platforms on the Internet. For instance, the producer of my Japanese example, Yuko, is inspired by an American tradition of scrapbook making that she teaches in evening classes in Tokyo. In her albums she uses various kinds of stickers with English words and phrases such as “Wedding,” “Newborn baby,” “Let it snow,” and “Summer.” She and her family

have been in the U.S. several times, they have American friends (and Yuko teaches English at a junior high school), and in the album—as in Japanese culture in general—one can certainly spot an affinity with “everything American.” At the same time we meet mother and daughter dressed in traditional kimonos, and there is a close-up of daughter Hibiki in her kimono, together with the little traditional Japanese origami paper bird. As I see it, Yuko explicitly wants her family to connect with both tradition and modernity—via the presentation in the album. Such more affective readings can only be realized through close scrutiny of concrete albums: page composition,

gesture details, added physical material, local as well as global characteristics.

Social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has described the relationship between the local and the global as follows:

To really meet the challenge of comparison in a context characterized by high degrees of connectivity and circulation, which I believe defines our era of globalization, we need to understand more about the ways in which the forms of circulation and the circulation of forms create the conditions for the production of locality. I stress locality because, in the end, this is where our vitally important archives reside. Localities—in this world and in this argument—are temporary negotiations between various globally circulating forms. They are not subordinate instances of the global, but in fact the main evidence of reality.²⁶

To understand, for instance, Japanese family photographs, one needs to know something about Japanese culture, such as family structures and cultural views on gender, on the education system, and on the tradition of photography in Japan. Likewise, if possible at all, it can be important to talk to the owners of the albums (as I did with Yuko), to ask about the albums' production and use, their placement in the home, the social contexts in which they function, the stories behind the images, and so on. As in many Japanese families the father works many kilometers away from the family, which he comes to visit only every second weekend. Therefore, most pages of the album cover the daily lives of Yuko and her two children, whereas the father is seen only at specific festive occasions as in the example shown. And even here, the mother is sitting on the sofa with the two children and the father is standing at quite a distance with the grandmother between him and the sofa.

MATERIAL CULTURE STUDIES

Material culture studies would also be a relevant helping-discipline to look at all my three examples, which are indeed material objects, including material other than photographs as well. As one of the pioneers in this field Daniel Miller has written, in his study of the material culture of British households in *The Comfort of Things*, it doesn't matter "what one learns from knowing the class,

gender and origin of people" as much as "what one doesn't learn from these things." The "diversity" that Miller explores in his book "does not reduce to sociological categories or labels, or for that matter colloquial categories or labels."²⁷ Similarly, in his 2010 book *Stuff*, Miller criticized the philosophical division between particularity and universality, arguing that "one of the major dangers that besets the world today lies in the increasing dissociation of the two extremes."²⁸

My premise, inspired by Miller's and Appadurai's "takes," is thus: In order to write about a given family album, I need to maneuver between the global and the local, the general and the particular, the macro and the micro level, ideology and emotion, and to be inclusive in my methodology rather than reductive. Albums are objects that are produced, used, circulated, talked about, laughed at, cried at, cared for, forgotten, and even discarded, as Edwards has pointed out. While every family photograph adheres in some way to the rituals and conventions of a particular group of people in history (e.g. American and Danish urban middle-class family life in the 1970s, Japanese urban middle-class family life in the 2000s), we must also consider the physical materiality of each album and its individual images. We must take notice of the feather in Yuko's album, the central placement and the rather regular use of the albums in the home, as well as the clippings and presentation of the individual pages, to name examples from the two other albums. In so doing, we can see the album as a highly social device actively constructing not only memories but also personal cosmologies and human relations in the presence of its making.

Material culture studies have encouraged a focus on photography as "a thing." Adopting these approaches, we must ask: What can the images in the albums tell us about their owners, taken as either individuals or as belonging to a local culture? How have the albums been used? What have they meant to their owners? Family photo albums must be approached not as static entities but as social and dynamic objects that perform cultural work. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright have argued, "the objects we create, gaze on, and use for communication or simply for pleasure have the power to give meaning to us as well as in the dynamic interaction of social networks. The exchange of meaning and value between

people, on the one hand, and the objects and technologies in their worlds, on the other, is interactive and dynamic.”²⁹ Working on family photo albums in general I support their conclusion that “artefacts such as images and imaging technologies have politics and agency.”³⁰ Yuko, whose home is filled with albums, strengthens the rather weak bonds and roots of her own family through her regular and consistent album production. She also compensates for the distance of her husband by mostly filling the albums with photos of her children.

In a later study of family albums made by Japanese in American diaspora, *Turning Leaves*,³¹ Chalfen further underlines the importance of examining the albums as communication between people and as social statements about the everyday life of the album’s producer. As Chalfen writes: “Making family photographs and organizing albums are modern additions to a human’s many ways of symbolically defining and ordering the world.”³² Many photographs in the Danish holiday album are taken in front of and inside the hotel, showing the family making themselves “at home” in the exotic foreign context (ill. 2): reading the newspaper, brushing their shoes, knitting, having breakfast. The subtext reads “home again at Stella Polaris” (ill. 4) and various postcards as well as objects including the name of the hotel are glued onto the pages. The gray—and not very exotic—feather of a pigeon is glued to a page. Local supermarkets are compared to Danish as well as the price of a cup of coffee. It is as if the act of photographing and later on producing this family photo album is a way of understanding and coping with the new and slightly scaring exoticness, and at the same time presenting the conquering of the exotic to friends and family at home, when traveling to southern Europe was a relatively rare phenomenon.

Since photo albums are relational and performative, it is firstly important to focus on what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht called the sensual side of historic experience, the everyday worlds and the lived experience (*Erleben*) in his study of everyday as well as public culture and history in one year, 1926.³³ This more sensual, in the sense of related to emotions, and individual approach to the “stuff” of everyday life is also what Daniel Miller had in mind when he observed: “Material Culture thrives as a rather undisciplined substitute for a

discipline: inclusive, embracing, original sometimes quirky researches and observations.”³⁴

ALBUMS AS STRUCTURES OF AFFECT AND FEELING

British photo historian Patricia Holland’s essay “‘Sweet It Is to Scan’: Personal Photographs and Popular Photography” (1996) is an example of how the more aesthetically formed tradition of making photo history started to include family photography. Following Bourdieu, she talks about the conventionality of family photography, where the pictures show families “as they want to be seen.” “While family pictures, on the surface, act as social documents,” Holland writes, “a closer examination reveals the complex of interrelations and scandals that weave through the soap opera of personal life.”³⁵ And: “Revelations about child abuse and family discord indicate that worse horrors may underlie the aspirational surface of the innocent family snapshot.”³⁶ Holland’s article is thorough, and her points may well prove to be relevant for many family albums. But this negatively valorized, ideological critique of family photographs addresses only one dimension of their meaning.

Such an interpretation must be supplemented with an analysis that incorporates the affective experiences and performativity that can also be found in family albums.³⁷ Or the “structures of feelings,” to use the title of an essay by Raymond Williams.³⁸ In this 1977 text he argues against the Marxist cultural studies tradition of exclusively focusing on ideology, institutions and systems instead of including consciousness, lived experience, feeling, everyday social relations, “what is actually being lived”³⁹—in short: structures of feeling. “We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.”⁴⁰

During the last decade “affect studies” has developed as a field within cultural studies in its broadest and most interdisciplinary (and heterogeneous) sense.⁴¹ It would lead too far to describe this “affective turn” more thoroughly here, but common to many of these approaches is an interest

in understanding affect, emotions, and feelings as part of or even central to the social and the political, and not just as something reducible to the private and the subjective and therefore not worthy of critical, academic studies. Another approach is to consider affect, not just as something produced within subjects, but rather as something that produces subjects.

As such, “affect studies” is a relevant analytical angle with which to approach the family photo album—as “structures of feeling.” Oliver’s album can be seen as a gesture of love and affection from his mother, who produced the album. His father is much older than the mother, and as in Yuko’s album he is relatively rarely seen in the family photos. But Oliver’s mother has included some images where he poses with his three sons (ill. 6), as if she wanted them to connect even more—via the album. The album is full of gestures, such as family members standing close and touching each other, and at the same time the motifs are rather everyday-like. The father is a hobby artist and on the last page of the album (ill. 7), where Oliver is about to leave home to study art professionally, it is as if the mother tries to connect son and father in their mutual artistic interest. Yuko creates an affectual bond between her children and their dog (ill. 9) as well as between herself and her too often distant husband, focusing on the physical closeness of them at their wedding (ill. 10) as opposed to later family life (ill. 8.). By including so much “daily life” in the vacation album from the otherwise exotic place, the Danish 1971 album is in itself a demonstration of Williams’ underlining of the importance of the affect of “what is actually being lived.”

MAKING ORDER

Patricia Holland rightly observed that some of the apparently happy compositions in the family photo albums can cover up personal traumas or critical situations.⁴² I would not use the word “cover,” however, but rather return to Chalfen’s idea of the album as a place to symbolically define and order the world, which I think the producers of all my three albums do. The insecurity of meeting the foreign is made familiar and is “tamed” as such in the family vacation album from 1971 where things belonging to the foreign country—

hotel room, restaurant, bird’s feather—are compared to or assimilated with the well-known. The family is being re-negotiated as a mother-with-two-children family in Yuko’s album. The grief related to the departure of the son is being worked through in Oliver’s album, made by his mother. There is a lot of affective comfort in albums such as these, in Yuko’s and Oliver’s cases related to separation. Or, as Daniel Miller puts it in his analysis of the everyday things in people’s homes, “the alternative to society is not a fragmented individual but people who strive to create relationships to both people and things. These relationships include material and social routines and patterns which give order, meaning and often moral adjudication to their lives.” That order, he explains, “familiar and repetitive, may also be a comfort to them.”⁴³ Miller calls this “making order” an *aesthetics*—an apt term to describe most family photo albums, which are indeed often highly aesthetic and personally formed vernacular “artworks.”

The albums introduced very briefly and just as illustrative examples here open up the possibility for numerous interpretations, depending on the focus with which one meets them. More generally, family photography can teach us to see new aspects of or develop new approaches to vernacular photographs, to regard them not just as images but as social objects that are entangled with the nature of photography itself. Snapshots and family photographs link people to people, and people to objects or things in their lives. Family albums are of course also strongly related to memory, nostalgia, and the melancholia attached to separation, as Barthes has put forth. And photographs are not just tools of language, discourse, or power, as Bourdieu and later John Tagg have proposed.⁴⁴ Rather, they create discourse themselves, and they perform stories about gender, national identity, the family, and much more.

We need to be aware of the importance of considering the emotional aspects of family photography, its function as a social tool, the personal creation of identity, culture, and history, *as well as* the more sociological and ideological aspects of the material. My album examples are simultaneously a locus of trauma and conflict and a site of love, affection, personal story-telling, and production of subjectivity.

ALBUMS AS FLIRTATIOUS CONTACT ZONES

As my examples show, the album is a visual material that communicates, circulates, is used, and is stored. Oliver's album is a central part of his new family life, where he sometimes goes through it with his own son. Yuko's albums can be seen as an output of an ongoing creative process of scrapbook making. An art history or visual culture-historical approach to photography would benefit from related disciplines such as material culture, affect studies, social-cultural theory, and anthropology. Only thereby can you articulate the aspects of family photography that fall out of the studies by Bourdieu, Barthes, Marien, and Newhall. Family photographs are always dynamic, never static in their meaning, just as they not only reflect social relationships and rites but also create them.

In a study of Irish anthropological photography, Justin Carville, inspired by anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt, uses the term "contact zone" to describe photography not as a one-way power relation (as John Tagg describes it), but rather as a means to engage with other people and as "part of the process of integrating with the community."⁴⁵ Carville talks about photography used by anthropologists, but I find the term "contact zone" very useful for describing what is going on in the family album—both when constructed by its maker to produce a tale of the family and when viewed later by the family members or by other members of the community.⁴⁶

Several contemporary scholars—many of them mentioned above—provide a bridge between anthropology and art history/visual studies. They represent a recent critique of visual culture studies as being too much oriented toward a semiological and discourse critical approach. Instead they bring the relational, affective, and performative qualities of the family photography album to our attention.

I have tried to show how actual photographs can inform and transform theories as much as being explained by them. Miller calls for "quirky" observations. As Patrizia Di Bello has argued, "we should embrace the flirtatiousness of photographs, never yielding to one conclusive and stable meaning; and learn to flirt back."⁴⁷ By flirting she wants "to propose that we should find ways to embrace and build upon the open, indeterminate and ambiguous relationship between photography

and meaning, and recognize that this ambiguity, mutability, recalcitrance to being pinned down by one discourse, one practice, one set of theoretical tools, is photography's very strength."⁴⁸

If my material—both the Japanese, the American and the Danish—presents a history of difference, a history excluded from the "official" histories of photography, it is a material history of the everyday life in modern post-war culture. It is a kind of material that has not yet been fully integrated in archives and museums, but that exists on shelves and in boxes in private homes. These examples offer sociological insight into specific everyday cultures at particular historical moments. They can point to aspects of a global Kodak culture and how photography has been an important tool in our understanding and way of coping with modernity. Finally, they talk about photography's existential dimension and the power to speak one's own history, while underlining that photography is both a material and a social practice.

To conclude, a lot has already been written on family photography by some of the researchers mentioned above, and many other names. But compared with the amount of material in private homes across the world, waiting to be looked at, narrated, written about, it is still very little. The practice has not yet really entered the histories of photography, nor have family photo albums been used as source material in history writing in general, and very little has been done on more recent everyday practices. As already put forth, one reason is that this more recent material is not yet included in museums and archives, but also that it seems to be "easier" to write about old material with the distance of perspective that it gives the researcher. In the light of the recent explosion of private family photo material on social platforms on the Internet, the urge to do fieldwork and research on contemporary family photography, recognizing its emotional and affective qualities as well as its ambiguity and mutability, as Di Bello suggests, is even more relevant and needed. Not the least because the family photo album in its material form as we know it is a disappearing phenomenon. This kind of visual material opens up for another, and maybe more subtle, understanding of cultural similarities and differences, which is much needed in a world where globalization

sometimes cements cultural differences rather than encouraging understanding.

Notes

1. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002), 445.
2. Ibid.
3. James Elkins' edited volume *Photography Theory* from 2007 is a typical, recent example.
4. Geoffrey Batchen, 'Snapshots', *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 124.
5. Ibid.
6. See for instance Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Chicago, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot: Versions of Life* (Ohio: Bowling Green State Popular Press, 1987); Richard Chalfen, *Turning Leaves: The Photograph Collections of Two Japanese American Families* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Anna Dahlgren, *Ett medium för visuell bildning: Kulturhistoriska perspektiv på fotoalbum 1850–1950* (A medium for visual education. Cultural historical perspectives on photo albums 1850–1950) (Stockholm: Macadam, 2013); Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2001); Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning and Effects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Jonas Larsen, 'Families Seen Sightseeing: The Performativity of Tourist Photography', *Space and Culture* 8, no. 4 (2005): 416–34; Sigrid Lien, *Lengselens Bilder. Fotografiet i norsk utvandringshistorie* (Pictures of Longing. Photography in the History of the Norwegian US Emigration) (Oslo: Spartacus, 2009); Christopher Musello, 'Studying the Home Mode: An Exploration of Family Photography and Visual Communication', *Studies in Visual Communication* 6, no. 1 (1980): 26–7; Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Petersen, eds, *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010); Catherine Zuromskis, *Snapshot Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013).
7. Arjun Appadurai, 'How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective', *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2010): 10.
8. Scholars writing about "family photos" (the term used by, for instance, Rose) use several different terms for the same phenomenon including "home mode photography" (Chalfen, Musello). The terms "vernacular" and "snapshot" (both used by Batchen) overlap with "family photos" as well, and likewise "amateur" is used about both "family photo shooters" and more ambitious "photo club" photographers.
9. Richard Chalfen, *Snapshot: Versions of Life* (Ohio: Bowling Green State Popular Press, 1987).
10. Geoffrey Batchen calls for such a new history of the snapshot in his article 'Snapshots. Art History and the Ethnographic Turn', *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 121–42.
11. Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography. A Middle-Brow Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), originally *Un art moyen* (Paris: Ed. Minuit, 1965).
12. See Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye, eds, *Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
13. Starting with names such as Christian Boltanski, Ilya Kabakov and Shimon Attie to more recent material by younger artists such as Fiona Tan, Lorie Novak, Maria Miesenberger, Hasan Elahi, Kent Klich, Pia Arke and many others.
14. Some examples are: *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Snapshots: The Photography of Everyday Life* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1998); Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Other Pictures* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000); J. Paul Getty Museum, *Close to Home: An American Album* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004); Museum of Photographic Arts, *Snapshots: From the Box Brownie to the Camera Phone* (San Diego: Museum of Photographic Arts, 2005); National Gallery of Art, *The Art of the American Snapshot* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2007); Michel Frizot and Cédric de Veigy, *Photos trouvées* (London/NY: Phaidon, 2006); Christian Skrein, *Snapshots: The Eye of the Century* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004).
15. Thomas Walther, *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection* (New York: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000), no pagination.
16. Ibid.
17. André Wang Hansen, *Fotografi og familie* (Photography and Family) (Odense: Bidrags skriftserie nr. 5, 1982), 8.
18. Interesting studies on photography and "the tourist gaze" have been made by scholars such as John Urry in his legendary *The Tourist Gaze*, originally published in 1990 but later revised; Michael Haldrup and Jonas Larsen, *Tourism, Performance and the Everyday: Consuming the Orient* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Simon Coleman and Mike Crang, eds, *Tourism: Between Place and Performance* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002); Mike Crang, 'Picturing Practices: Research through the Tourist Gaze', *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): 359–73.
19. Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographs and the Sound of History', *Visual Anthropology* 21: 1 + 2 Spring/Fall (2005): 27–46.
20. Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2014).
21. Edwards, 'Photographs and the Sound of History', 38.

22. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds, *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004).
23. Edwards, 'Photographs and the Sound of History', 39.
24. Roland Barthes, 'The Rhetoric of the Image', in *Barthes, Image Music Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 44.
25. Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *Foster, The Return of the Real* (Chicago, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
26. Arjun Appadurai, 'How Histories Make Geographies: Circulation and Context in a Global Perspective', *Transcultural Studies* 1 (2010): 12.
27. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 292.
28. Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 9.
29. Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.
30. Ibid.
31. Richard Chalfen, *Turning Leaves: The Photograph Collections of Two Japanese American Families* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).
32. Ibid., 14.
33. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
34. Miller, *Stuff*, 1.
35. Patricia Holland, "'Sweet It Is to Scan': Personal Photographs and Popular Photography", in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 1996/2000), 156.
36. Ibid., 159. Marianne Hirsch has also worked with family photography's relation to trauma in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
37. Another very inspiring study of the connection of family photography to trauma and grief is Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), where Chapter 6 is on 9/11.
38. Raymond Williams, 'Structures of Feeling', in *Williams, Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35.
39. Ibid., 131.
40. Ibid., 132.
41. Among feminist scholars such as Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant, sociologist and geographers such as Nigel Thrift, critical theory thinkers such as Brian Massumi, and Hardt and Negri, cognition theorists such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Lazarus, psychologists such as Daniel Kahnemann and Silvan Tomkins.
42. Like Hirsch (1997).
43. Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, 296.
44. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988).
45. Justin Carville, "'My Wallet of Photographs': Photography, Ethnography and Visual Hegemony in John Millington Synge's the Aran Islands", *Irish Journal of Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (2007): 8.
46. Another inspiration to write about photography as "a meeting" could be Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Chicago, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
47. Patrizia Di Bello, 'Seductions and Flirtations', *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (2008): 143.
48. Ibid., 151.